

# Committee on Resources

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## FIRE, PUBLIC SAFETY, AND DESCHUTES COUNTY

### CONGRESSIONAL NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Submitted by Deschutes County Sheriff, Les Stiles, Bend, Oregon

Thank you to this committee and to Congressman Walden for the invitation to speak about the issues surrounding wildland fire and public safety in Deschutes County.

A quote from the introduction to the book "Fire and Ashes" by John MacLean, published in 2003, succinctly summarizes the issues we need to discuss today:

"Today nearly every policy that governed firefighting in the modern era is being challenged. The issues range from whether to fight a fire at all, especially if life and property are not threatened, to the degree of acceptable risk once the battle is joined. Settlement in the wildland urban interface---WUI or the red zone---a place where open

lands and development meet, has multiplied at astonishing rates and with few controls since the 1980s, to make an already dangerous situation explosive. At the same time, almost a century of fire suppression and, more recently, reduced logging have created wildlands badly in need of more fires not fewer.

Paradoxically, certain logging practices over the decades, such as careless disposal of slash and excessive logging of the biggest trees, have contributed to a buildup of brush and small trees and thus to a more fire prone forest. Yet the reality of more people plus more fires guarantees conflict. While national fire policy now calls for millions of acres to be deliberately burned each year, a preliminary Forest Service study reports that nearly half the planned ignitions have been delayed by legal appeals---environmental groups seeking to curtail logging, home owners and politicians trying to minimize smoke.

Fires have grown more intense in recent years because of drought, which has been made worse by global warming. Concern about wildland fire and forest health, meanwhile is no longer restricted to land-management agencies such as the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), inhabitants of fire country, and small environmental elite. The environmental movement has become broadly based and, together with the media, has succeeded in raising national awareness of the values and dangers at stake. Partly as a consequence, federal land-management agencies have been forced to change their focus from income-producing activities---logging, mining and grazing---to custodianship of the land. Laudable as the change may seem to those who do not log, mine, or run cattle, the agencies have lost authority and cohesion as a result. "The Forest Service is an agency in limbo," says Gerald W. Williams, the Forest Service's chief historian."

Central Oregon and Deschutes County is rich in natural treasure and beauty. Our mountains, crisp, clean lakes and rivers, and forests are widely recognized as a playground for outdoor enthusiasts and a major attraction for new residents. And fire has always been a part of that equation and a threat in Deschutes County. The Awbrey Hall fire in 1990 destroyed 21 homes and forced the evacuation of many thousands of people. The Skeleton Fire in 1996 destroyed 19 homes and forced the evacuation of thousands of people. The Cache Mountain Fire in 2002 destroyed two homes in Black Butte and forced the evacuation of over 5000 people in less than two hours and a loss of significant income to the Black Butte Corporation. This year we have had four major fires in Deschutes County in the past eight weeks. The Davis Fire in June destroyed over 22,000 acres and almost cost the lives of three of my deputies. The "18" fire started within a mile of a large sub-division that, but for the grace of a north wind, would have destroyed many homes, within the Bend city limits. And last but not least is the Link fire this summer in the area of Cache Mountain's fire last year. It burned very close to the "trigger" point where we would have again evacuated thousands of people and potentially lost more homes. Because of a fire that began last Wednesday, we are again facing (for the third time in 12 months) another evacuation of Black Butte Ranch. The Bear and Booth complex fire continues to burn in Deschutes and Jefferson Counties and on Thursday, August 21, 2003 forced the evacuation of Camp Sherman and all campgrounds on the Metolius River. The four fires in the

past eight weeks have alone destroyed approximately 30,000 acres. The cost to the Sheriff's Office exceeds \$100,000 and does not come close to accounting for the risk to firefighters, police officers and Search and Rescue members. The cost in disrupted lives, air quality, animal habitat and lost revenue for businesses dependent upon our forests, is probably unidentifiable.

Shortly after last year's Cache Fire where we lost two homes in Black Butte, I met with Senator Wyden and briefed him on the issues of local wildland fire and my concerns for public safety. I sent him a paper asking for assistance at the Federal level and discussed the Deschutes National Forest with respect to problems ranging from "environmental restrictions to firefighting" to forest thinning to Federal OSHA concerns about the aggressiveness with which initial attacks can be made to fires. To date I have received no response to that request.

Because of the forest floor fuel load, thick stands of timber choked with small trees and blow-down dead, fire suppression efforts and a lack of thinning or logging, most of the forested areas in Deschutes County are tinderboxes waiting for an ignition source to explode. Prior to the Davis fire there were areas on Davis Mountain that were impossible to walk through because of so many downed trees. Further, there are many inhabited areas of Deschutes County that are completely surrounded by unhealthy forests with fuel loads so large it is almost guaranteed they will become "catastrophic" at the time of ignition.

The primary mission of the Deschutes County Sheriff is Public Safety. The primary threat to Public Safety in Deschutes County is fire. Please know, however that we have not been sitting idly wringing our hands and waiting for the cataclysm. Many of us have been actively involved in prevention and treatment programs such as Project Impact and Project Fire Free for several years. Great strides have been made in reducing fuel loads near homes, creating defensible space; "fire-proofing" homes by changing building materials and roof material. And we have hard evidence that those prevention efforts paid off during the Cache Mountain Fire in Black Butte last year. However, in the end, these projects, while highly important and needed, are not sufficient to diminish the risk to a reasonable level. The Federal Government owns Two thirds of Deschutes County and we would like the government to be a good neighbor and participate in this effort to clean up their property as we have done on private property, locally. If the government does not take the same steps, our efforts could become meaningless once a "catastrophic" wildfire is ignited.

The challenges we face in Deschutes County, Oregon are an excellent microcosm for the issues being faced around America with respect to fire. We have increasing population growth in the "forested areas" (wildland urban interface) surrounding the communities of Bend, Redmond, Sisters, Black Butte, Sunriver, and in particular the community of LaPine. At the same time tremendous tree and vegetation growth has occurred in the Deschutes National Forest. The most recent estimate from forestry experts is between 225 and 250 million board feet per year. There has been little removal of wood fiber from the Deschutes National Forest in the last 10 plus years, certainly nothing coming even close to the annual growth rate. Couple these factors with a forest floor fuel load of approximately 100 to 150 tons per acre (source—Tucker Williamson---private forester and consultant) of dead and dying timber; add the growth of smaller trees combined with high density; throw in drought conditions; add a dry thunderstorm and few bolts of lightening and you have a recipe for a disaster.

The good news is that these challenges are not without solution. It is clear the problems being discussed today have been recognized at the national level. After the 2000 fire season when over 8 million acres had burned and the average cost-per-day of fighting a Type II or Type I fire was 1 million dollars, the National Fire Plan was adopted. Under this plan the federal fire budget rose from about 1 billion a year to 1.8 billion for 2000, 2.9 billion in 2001, and 2.3 billion in 2002. This year has seen the Congress pass the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HR 1904), which will allow for thinning of the National Forests and reduction in fuel loads-----assuming it passes the Senate and is signed into law.

The policy of "let it burn", which is controversial from many viewpoints, is not new. Elers Koch, a US Forest Service Ranger, who fought the 3 million acre "Big Blow Up" Fire in 1910 stated "I firmly believe that if the Forest Service had never expended a dollar in this country since 1900 there would have been no appreciable difference in the area burned over" (Source---Fire and Ashes---MacLean, 2003). Koch may have been right 100 years ago. That policy, today, would lead to the loss of millions of acres and many more homes and lives each year.

The problem with this policy at the Federal level is that "let it burn" is premised on what is good for a healthy forest. In other words a forest that is "natural". What was a natural forest in Deschutes County over 150 years ago, before humans started intervening, is not the same forest we live with today. To quote

MacLean in "Fire and Ashes" again: "The amount of forest and grassland consumed by fire dropped dramatically from an average of about 30 million acres a year at the turn of the century, and from highs of 40 to 50 million acres a year in the drought years of the 1930's to an average of about 5 million acres a year in the 1970's."

With increased fire protection and suppression efforts and the reduction of timber harvests and thinning, the fuel loads have increased dramatically in the last 15 years. As a result we have total destruction when fires are burning hotter and more destructively. The result is devastation. For example in many areas following the Davis Fire, the soil is burned and scorched at least 8 inches deep and completely sterilized. Nature may take care of this over time, but it will certainly not be in the near future. Meanwhile, the runoffs into Odell Creek and Davis Lake will be silt laden and increase the speed with which this lake becomes a marsh, fish will die off and preserved eagle habit could be eliminated.

The primary solution to our fire problems in Deschutes County is really quite simple and at the same time amazingly complex and controversial. Thin the forest and reduce the forest floor fuel load. Because nature cannot take care of the problems in the same manner as she did before man's intervention, we must give her a hand and assume some of her responsibilities. Once the forests are thinned and healthy, fire will become the friend of the forests and not the devastating enemy it now is. Once the forests are thinned and healthy, fires will become easier to manage, safer to fight when appropriate, more nature's tool, and pose less of a problem to public safety.

Although these actions are being taken and will help solve some of the problems associated with fire, there remain other challenges we deal with at the local level. The issues relating to wildland interface problems within community boundaries are primarily a local problem. We are dealing with the issues of Fire Free Zones through a combined committee of community representatives that work together to educate the public on how to "fire-proof" homes and their surrounding grounds. Project Impact, which was started with seed funding from FEMA, has allowed the community to make a number of significant changes that will enhance our ability to deal with wildfires. Unfortunately, the funding support for this program has gone away and with the severe budget crisis we are facing in Oregon, the discretionary local dollars to continue at a significant level has gone away. As a result, a valuable program that has an effective prevention impact in our communities has, paradoxically at exactly the time it is most needed, is unavailable. Federal assistance in this area would be invaluable not to mention cost effective.

Certainly there are many definitions and opinions about what is best for a healthy forest. Many people express concern about the thinning solution, as "that is just an excuse to bring back the logging of old-growth timber". Followed by the comment that "the only way we would even think about supporting this concept is with the imposition of diameter limits to insure old-growth trees are not taken". The concept of artificial diameter limits is one that is a good "straw-man" argument to create another issue and subtract from the basic problem being addressed. It has been made very clear to me while walking in the forests before and after our fires there are trees of large diameter that should be removed for the health of other trees in the area as well as overall forest health. It is my belief, however that the decision on which trees should be taken and thinned should be left in the hands of the professional forestry experts who know what is appropriate to maintain a healthy forest that protects old growth trees. Undoubtedly there are circumstances when old trees should be removed.

The issue of forest health and how best to achieve a healthy forest and maintain old growth timber has become so politicized and the various groups addressing the issue have become so polarized and emotional, that we are in gridlock and have been for the past 10 years. During that time, the fuel loads have grown larger, the forests have thickened until they are very unhealthy in many areas, diseased and dead timber has increased and millions of acres have been blackened taking with it uncounted numbers of animals and endangered species. Using the environmental protection act as a political tool, filing appeal after appeal and lawsuit after lawsuit to stop the actions of agencies charged with caring for and managing the forests has resulted in the catastrophic fires we are now fighting in Deschutes County.

It is time for this type of behavior to end. It is time to address the problem of wildland fire and forest management in a substantive manner. It is time to create consensus and if necessary make unpopular decisions. And it is time NOW, not tomorrow. Last year when I met with Senator Wyden I closed our conversation with the following statement "if we fail to address this issue today, I will be involved in many more fires next year and the years after until one of them becomes the fire where we lose an entire community, many lives or both".

That statement is not an exaggeration. People who do not live here do not understand the close proximity of established communities and the forest. For example, my family and I live in Bend, a community that exceeds 50,000 people. We live in an established neighborhood, well within the city limits. Our home is close to shopping, the hospital and a significant medical complex and across from a school. When the Skeleton fire exploded in 1996, we could see the red glow of the fire from our front yard. During the recent "18" fire, we could see flames from the street that runs by our hospital. And many times we have found burned pine needles and other debris on our cars, parked in our driveway. And Deschutes County has other communities, such as LaPine and Black Butte that are actually in the forests. When a fire begins near those communities, the potential for devastation is understood by all.

We have the power and the ability to do something - TODAY. We need you and the Federal government to become a partner with Deschutes County in finding solutions to this expensive and potentially deadly public safety issue. I urge you to do everything in your power to help make sure the Healthy Forests Restoration Act passes in the Senate and becomes law. I urge you to continue to develop programs and policy that will support prevention programs and interventions currently under way at the local level with Federal support.

Thank you.